

The Fugitive 1922-1925

A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION TWENTY YEARS AFTER

BY ALLEN TATE

The Tennessee Renaissance about which Mr. Tate writes in the following pleasant retrospections began at Vanderbilt in the autumn of 1921. The founders of the Fugitive group were Walter Clyde Curry, Donald Davidson, James M. Frank, Sidney Mtttron Hirsch, Stanley Johnson, Merrill Moore, John Crowe Ransom, Alec B. Stevenson, and Allen Tate. Members in absentia were W. Y. Elliott and William Frierson. Jesse and Ridley Wills were added late in 1922, Robert Penn Warren early in 1924, and Laura Riding in March, 1925. In April, 1922, the magazine began as a quarterly; in the following year there were five numbers, six in 1924, and four in 1925. Although contributions were mostly from group members, outsiders appeared upon solicitation. Scattered through the nineteen numbers one finds work by Hart Crane, Robert Graves, Witter Bynner, David Morton, Olive Dargan, Louis Untermeyer, John Gould Fletcher, Harold Vinal, George Dillon, and L. A. G. Strong. When in December, 1925, its progenitors abandoned their lusty infant—for unlike many of its coevals, the magazine did not perish of inanition—the non-regional and non-political phase of the movement was laid away. But its historical significance has been enhanced by those of the group who have since attained national eminence. One of them is Mr. Tate, whose value to the Princeton Library does not stop with his charter membership in the American Archives Committee: we suspect that our Princeton Collection will be considerably enlarged at some future date by the publications of those young writers who have been working in the Creative Arts Program under the happy aegis of Mr. Tate, and his associate, Mr. Blackmur.

SOME time in November 1921 I was talking to Donald Davidson, then a young English instructor, on the front steps of old College Hall at Vanderbilt. After some casual talk Don told me that he and a few other men, including John Crowe Ransom, had

been meeting at the house of a friend on every other Saturday night to read poems and to discuss "philosophy." He asked me to come the next time. I said that I would but I cannot remember whether I felt any excitement except in my own vanity. For Don and John were professors; and when I got there the next Saturday night, being the only undergraduate present, I was flattered. Who read poems I do not know; yet I seem to remember that Don read a long romantic piece called "The Valley of the Dragon," in which the monster shielded lovers from the world. I imitated it soon afterwards; but neither the original nor its echo was allowed to survive.

I remember the tone of the conversation; it was not very literary but philosophical and even philological; and I soon suspected why I had been asked to come. We had two hosts, Mr. James Frank, a cultivated business man of Nashville, and his brother-in-law, Dr. Sidney Mtttron Hirsch, a man of vast if somewhat perverse erudition; and it was plain that I had been invited to hear him talk. He was a mystic and I think a Rosicrucian, a great deal of whose doctrine skittered elusively among imaginary etymologies. At that time I was not very consciously a poet. I was studying Greek and Sanskrit, and if I had behaved myself I should no doubt have gone the next year to the American School at Athens. But I had not studied Hebrew, and I never knew what Dr. Hirsch's middle name, Mtttron, meant; I understood that it might be an archangel. He was a large man, an invalid who never moved from his *chaise longue*, and he always presided at our meetings. On this first evening he asked me what I knew about the Trojan horse. My answer must have seemed to him ignorant, for he brushed it aside and went on to explain that *woode* in Middle English meant "mad," and that the Trojan horse being the wooden horse must be the mad horse; and that since madness is divine, the Trojan horse is the esoteric and symbolic horse. Shining pince-nez stood up on his handsome nose, and curled Assyrian hair topped a massive brow.

How many men were there that evening I cannot recall. (Until Laura Riding became a member of the group, after I had gone to live in New York, ladies were never present, only Mrs. Frank and Miss Hirsch, the philosopher's sister, coming in after the poems

were all read to serve us an excellent supper.) Yet all that winter there was a constant attendance of some five or six men who ranged themselves somewhat formally round Dr. Hirsch's *chaise longue*. By February or early March of 1922 the original "Fugitive group" was formed, although it had no name. There was Stanley Johnson, a man who would stand no nonsense from anybody and who wrote some good verse, and later wrote a novel about professors, having been one himself; but after the novel he never wrote any more. Alec Stevenson had been in the war, and I think for a time he thought of being a teacher, but he went into business, and after the first year of our meetings wrote less and less; but he wrote some beautiful things that should have long ago gone into a book. The only academic scholar among us was Walter Clyde Curry, later the author of books on Chaucer and Shakespeare and of learned articles on mediaeval magic and astrology: he was a sympathetic friend and a sonneteer who could write good lines but he was not committed to poetry; some years later he neatly typed out his poems, had them bound, and gave them the title: "Futility, a Volume of Useless Verse." To these early meetings came also the Starr brothers, Milton and Alfred, the latter a good mathematician and both well-read men. William Yandell Elliott and William Frierson, being away at Oxford as Rhodes scholars, were made members *in absentia*. There may have been casual visitors that first year but I cannot remember them.

Uppermost in my mind are Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom, who for me, at that early stage, meant just about everything. Don was writing what I suppose were his first poems; they were about lovers and dragons, and there was one about a tiger-woman that I thought was remarkable; but Don's own liking for this sort of thing declined at about the time mine did; and in the summer of 1922 he began to write poems that I think are still among his best. John Ransom always appeared at the Fugitive meetings with a poem (some of us didn't), and when his turn came he read it in a dry tone of understatement. I can only describe his manner in those days as irony which was both brisk and bland. Before we began to think of a magazine John had written a poem which foreshadowed the style for which he has become famous; it was "Necrological," still one of his best poems; I

marvelled at it because it seemed to me that overnight he had left behind him the style of his first book and, without confusion, had mastered a new style. We all knew that John was far better than we were, and although he never asserted his leadership we looked to him for advice.

Soon after the first issue of *The Fugitive* appeared I met Merrill Moore on the campus, and he astonished me by handing me a manuscript. It was a poem called "To a Fetish," his first, I believe, and in quatrains (five or six of them), a fact worth remarking since shortly afterwards he began to write only sonnets. I read the poem. "What do you think of it?" Merrill asked. "I think it is wonderful," I said. Then he asked me if I thought it would qualify him for "membership" in the group. I told him I was certain that it would. I took the poem to Donald Davidson, and Merrill came to the next meeting and to every other meeting I am sure until the group broke up. He quickly became the most prolific poet not only among us but probably in the world. He would read us his poems and we would criticize a line here and there; but he never acted upon our advice. It was easier for him to write a new poem than to revise an old one. To one meeting I believe he brought twenty-one poems, and he seldom brought fewer than ten. One of his poems was called "The Hackberry Tree"; it must have its claim to survival because although I have not seen it since the night he read it to us twenty years ago, I can remember it perfectly:

The hackberry tree baffles me.
I cannot tell whether the hackberry tree
Is in the clouds, or whether the clouds
Are in the hackberry tree.

But this is enough, lest Merrill do likewise by me. Eighteen years after *The Fugitive* appeared Merrill had written more than fifty thousand sonnets.

I have often been asked to tell how we got the magazine started, and why we called it *The Fugitive*. The man who first suggested that the poems we had been reading on alternate Saturday nights should be published in a magazine of our own, was our moderator, Dr. Hirsch; and it was he too who gave the magazine its name. As I have already said, we sat against the walls of Mr. Frank's living-room and were presided over by Dr. Hirsch. He was always Doctor,

as for that matter were we; attendance at the meetings seemed to confer upon us all the degree of Doctor, but Doctor of what I never knew. Dr. Hirsch asked us in turn to read our "offerings," as they were called, and when we had read he called for criticism. Carbon copies were always passed around in order to make possible minute criticism of every poem. Dr. Hirsch had an unfailing courtesy and elevation of tone, and when he came to me he usually lowered his head to his hand and waited patiently for it to be over. At that time I received only gentle comment (it soon changed!) doubtless because I was the only undergraduate and not much could be expected of me.

At a meeting like this, then, Dr. Hirsch proposed the magazine. It seemed to us all a project of the utmost temerity, if not of folly. This must have been some time in February 1922. Our imminent folly alarmed not only us but our friends; I remember distinctly that Dr. Edwin Mims, head of the Vanderbilt English Department, a Southern Liberal of the old school, and the boss of most of our group, invited us to lunch at a place called, I believe, the Commercial Club, and tried to persuade us to desist. A little later he praised us. But we went ahead. We found our printer, a negro firm which did the work very cheap; but after the first issue, when we had subscribers and other backers, we got a better printer, Cullum and Ghertner, whose names should be recorded because they were patient with our finical corrections of proof and in waiting for their money. I write all this from memory, without references; so I do not remember when we received more substantial patronage; yet it was not long before the Associated Retailers of Nashville, a business men's organization headed by Mr. Jacques Back, began to give us a subsidy, which was continued to the end. *The Fugitive* was doubtless the only "little magazine" which suspended publication not for lack of funds but for lack of an editor. The time came when nobody could do the work.

Then Dr. Hirsch gave us the name: *The Fugitive*, which turned out to be a good one because it invited ridicule. What were we fleeing from? Or towards? Dr. Hirsch's most erudite irony was turned upon these jests. For a Fugitive was quite simply a Poet: the Wanderer, or even the Wandering Jew, the Outcast, the man who carries the secret wisdom around the world. It was a fairly heavy responsibility for us to undertake, but we undertook it, with the innocence of which only the amateur spirit is capable.

All that remained now to be done was to select the poems for the first issue; which we did with our usual formality, by secret ballot, the result of which Donald Davidson still has on the back of a letter from the late Chancellor Kirkland of Vanderbilt telling Don that there were no University apartments available to him—news which in those days might have also told Don, if he needed telling, that he was indubitably a poet. I was admitted to the first issue with two preposterously bad poems, one of them about Sinbad the Sailor, which had started out to be a long poem but which never got beyond twenty lines. We took pseudonyms, less for concealment, I believe, than for the “romance”—as Ford Madox Ford said when I asked him why he liked to raise hogs. The disguises were not without humor and a certain judgment of ourselves. John’s “Roger Prim” needs no comment. Don’s “Robin Gallivant” still tells us something about that romantic poet. I don’t know why Merrill’s “Dendric” fitted him perfectly; I always thought, being an etymologist in those days, that it was the Greek root for tree, with the “pertaining to” suffix, giving us Tree-like or Tree-ish. But if Merrill was like a tree, the tree was a dense fern tree of the primordial tropics. When I announced that I was “Henry Feathertop”—from Hawthorne’s story—nobody objected; nobody even smiled.

After the second issue—the first was in April 1922, the second in June—we dropped the fancy names. Some of the New York reviewers had said that the first issue had been written by one man, and that man was John Ransom. So out of consideration for John’s future reputation, and perhaps in some vanity of our own, we published a key to the *noms de plume* which is on record in the third issue of *The Fugitive* and elsewhere, if anybody is interested in it.

In May, a few weeks after the first number, a doctor sent me to the mountains of North Carolina for six months; so I did not graduate with my class in June. In the nine months of my absence from Nashville I think I began seriously to study the writing of poetry, and I began to be a little more aware of the world, or at any rate of the literary world, at large. In May, Hart Crane had seen one of my poems in *The Double Dealer*, a “little” *Dial* published in New Orleans; he wrote me a letter from Cleveland and sent me some back numbers of *The Little Review*. He said that my poem showed that I had read Eliot—which I had not done;

but I soon did; and my difficulties were enormously increased. Anyhow from Eliot I went on to the other moderns, and I began to connect with the modern world what I had already learned from Baudelaire, first through Arthur Symons, then from Baudelaire himself. I mention this personal history because I believe it was through me that modern poetry made its first impact upon the doctors who gathered fortnightly in Mr. Frank's house. *The Waste Land* had come out by the time I went back to Nashville in February 1923. I began an impertinent campaign in Eliot's behalf in the South.

My conceit must have been intolerable. Had not the editors of *The Double Dealer* written me a letter saying that they saw in me the White Hope of the South? Add to that the easy lesson in shocking the bourgeoisie that I had learned from reading French poets, and was relearning for American use from Ezra Pound, and you have before you the figure of a twenty-two year-old prig as disagreeable as you could possibly conjure up, until you see in him several varieties of snobbishness, when he becomes even more disagreeable. In that moral condition I returned to Vanderbilt to get my degree. I got it; but meanwhile I almost didn't get it, because my career as a Fugitive had become, for me, more interesting than ever. In my absence I had discovered that I was to be a poet. I had tried a job in my brother's business in Kentucky and found out that I could not be a business man. My brother had found it out at about the same time.

One day in February 1923 (I think it was) I was typing a bad poem entitled "William Blake" on Walter Clyde Curry's typewriter. Dr. Curry gave the poets the freedom of his rooms. I became aware of a presence at my back and turning round I saw the most remarkable looking boy I had ever laid eyes on. He was tall and thin, and when he walked across the room he made a sliding shuffle, as if his bones didn't belong to one another. He had a long quivering nose, large brown eyes, and a long chin—all topped by curly red hair. He spoke in a soft whisper, asking to see my poem; then he showed me one of his own—it was about Hell, and I remember this line:

Where lightly bloom the purple lilies . . .

He said that he was sixteen years old and a sophomore. This

remarkable young man was "Red," Robert Penn Warren, the most gifted person I have ever known.

Red soon took me to see a friend of his who had come back from the war to get his degree—had come, in fact, glowing with the prestige of a first novel called "Hoax" which I immediately read with admiration and envy but which I have totally forgotten. This man was Ridley Wills, cousin of Jesse Wills who had recently written some excellent sonnets and had become a Fugitive. Two cousins were never more unlike. Jesse was tall, awkward, shy and sensitive; Ridley was small, graceful, ebullient, and arrogant, and one of the wittiest and most amusing companions I have ever had. Red, Ridley, and I joined up, and proceeded to get for the spring term room number 353 on the top floor of Wesley Hall, the theological building which bore over its portals the inscription: *Schola Prophetarum*. We named the architecture Methodist Gothic. It was no place for the heathen. Ten years later it burnt to the ground.

It was one large room with two double-decker beds, and Ridley and I being older than Red made him sleep above. In order to get into bed at night we had to shovel the books, trousers, shoes, hats, and fruit jars onto the floor, and in the morning, to make walking-space, we heaped it all back upon the beds. We stuck pins into Red while he slept to make him wake up and tell us his dreams. Red had made some good black-and-white drawings in the Beardsley style. One day he applied art-gum to the dingy plaster and when we came back we saw four murals, all scenes from *The Waste Land*. I remember particularly the rat creeping softly through the vegetation, and the typist putting a record on the gramophone. Then one night in the spring Ridley and I went down to "the" dog-wagon and wrote by dawn the entire *Golden Mean*. When we showed the manuscript to Merrill Moore the next day, Merrill was pretty envious; so we told him that he could be in the book if he wrote eulogies of us; which he did. But his tongue was not where it should have been.

Meanwhile we were going to the very serious meetings of the Fugitive group—too serious we thought, hence the dedicatory page of *The Golden Mean*—and we, the young ones, were trying all kinds of poetry, from Miss Millay to Eliot, from Robinson to Cummings who had just appeared. All things were possible in that time to us all, the older and the younger men alike.

The quickening of the imagination in the South twenty-five years ago seems to be an acknowledged fact. I believe it was a little different from the literary excitement in other regions at that time. After the war the South again knew the world, but it had a memory of another war; with us, entering the world once more meant not the obliteration of the past but a heightened consciousness of it; so that we had, at any rate in Nashville, a double focus, a looking two ways, which gave a special dimension to the writings of our school—not necessarily a superior quality—which American writing as a whole seemed to lack.

Not at that time, not in fact until about 1927, did we become consciously historical and sectional; yet we were all from that region—Ransom, Davidson, the two Willises, Warren, Moore, and I all being either Tennesseans or Kentuckians; I was born the farthest away, the Kentucky Blue Grass. Nobody ever did anything to bring this group together; the University did not “encourage writers”; none of us went there to become writers. We simply went there. And there we were. The great universities of the East could have boasted in that period groups of writers quite as good as ours, or better, though I doubt it; yet they were not groups in our sense, being associated only through the university and having a cosmopolitan range of interest without, I think, a simple homogeneous background which they could take with them to the university where it might suffer little or no break in continuity. I would call the Fugitives an intensive and historical group as opposed to the eclectic and cosmopolitan groups that flourished in the East. There was a sort of unity of feeling, of which we were not then very much aware, which came out of—to give it a big name—a common historical myth; and its use for the dramatic and lyrical arts, I believe, is that it expresses itself in the simple ritual of greeting a friend in the street. Although we disagreed, and at times quarreled, we had, in addition to the peculiar solidarity of artists everywhere, a deep understanding that gave even the quarrels a special intensity and form. Given this sort of group, I think I may disregard the claims of propriety and say quite plainly that, so far as I know, there was never so much talent, knowledge, and character accidentally brought together in one American place in our time.

I left Nashville late in 1923. In the next four years, which include two years after *The Fugitive* ceased publication, I was

in New York, but I tried to keep up with the old group: we were constantly sending our poems back and forth. And then one day—I cannot be sure of the year, I think 1926—I wrote John Ransom a new sort of letter. I told him that we must do something about Southern history and the culture of the South. John had written, on the same day, the same message to me. The letters crossed in the mail. Out of this new interest came “I’ll Take My Stand” and new writers, not poets but historians, novelists, and economists, who are altogether another story. To Donald Davidson more than to any other man belongs the later phase; but that is his story, not mine.

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